THE FAR SIDE OF EDEN

September 28, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them. ...the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken." --Genesis 3:21,23 (RSV)

Scripture
Romans 5:1-11
Genesis 3:20-24

Each of us has been put out of a Garden of Eden at one time or another and it's a good thing we were. Because the process of leaving the security of paradise is absolutely essential if we are to become full human beings. It is not usually a voluntary process, however. Fortunately, it is ordinarily guided by very wise people who love us so much they know that a lot that is important about us depends on our moving away from them.

The first foray outside Eden is universal, but in actuality a rather modest affair. One can witness it, for instance, at nine o'clock on the first morning of Day School. A small child is brought by mother or father and to the child's utter amazement and sometimes horror, left there - outside Eden! Mommy and Daddy walk away. Ordinarily the crisis is not severe: a few tears perhaps. It doesn't last long. But an important step toward becoming has happened and it has been a step away from security.

The process is built into human development and it continues through childhood into adolescence when pressure generating from within the relationship increases and occasionally erupts and everyone knows that in God's economy the time has come for a basic restructuring. God has made us that way. Parents and adolescents need to know and even to be able to laugh about the fact that the stresses and strains in what used to be such a comfortable relationship are both normal and necessary. And then one day most of us left Eden for good or, in some cases, were encouraged to leave, helped to leave, pushed out, driven to a college campus, abandoned there by parents who it appeared were actually smiling at each other as they drove away. Of course, there were tears, too, along with smiles.

Either in a series of events, nurtured by loving parents who always helped us to understand that the purpose of this whole exercise is to be strong enough to leave, or in one swift break, each of us was escorted, ushered to the door, pushed reluctantly through it or unceremoniously kicked out of Eden. Sometimes we tried to get back in. Sometimes we were so heartbroken with the memory of the paradise we had lost we tried to come home again. And if we were fortunate we ran into a gentle but firm hand that stopped us, turned us around and sent us away.

That process continues through life not, of course, in its original form. Now it happens as a series of life tasks, each of them inviting

choices: marrying and choosing a vocation, changing jobs, having children, moving to new communities. Now it happens when we leave old securities behind and step into new ventures which require a bit of bravery and innovation and the willingness to be independent, autonomous. Now it happens when the comfortable life-pattern of going to work every morning comes to an end and we must organize our lives around a new set of realities. The Garden of Eden is a metaphor for enclosed security. And part of the fascinating truth of that metaphor is that while it appears to be paradise, full human life is not possible within its boundaries. Part of the fascinating truth about us is that major and important decisions in life almost always seem like, and often are, decisions to leave security. On the first pages of the Bible it appears that God summons each of us to leave the Garden and walk, with Adam and Eve, into history.

The story is a precious gem. God has created and the results are good, very good in fact: oceans and beaches, maple trees, squirrels, geraniums, red-winged black birds, great white sharks, water and air - all of it is good. God has made a man from the clay, fashioned him, breathed air into him. God has made a woman because God's image is not complete in the man alone and the two of them are set down in the primal innocent paradise, where everything they need is available. The only condition is that God must be God and, of course, that is the one thing they can't understand and won't agree to. And so a serpent tempts the woman who tempts the man who eats the fruit of the one tree they weren't supposed to touch and when they are caught the man refuses to be responsible and blames his behavior on the woman and the woman blames the snake. The creator knows that everything is changed now and although the promise is that they will die for disobeying, God does not implement that punishment and instead escorts them to the gate.

Now, the mood of the story is wistful, poignant, not angry. God is almost reluctant. As they walk out of the Garden, with their failure, their disobedience, their rebellion, hovering over them like a dark cloud God is portrayed in marvelously parental terms, knitting clothes for them to wear, looking for all the world like a loving but knowing parent walking children to kindergarten on the first day of school...doing something which love demands, but which, at the moment, doesn't feel good.

Turn the page and human history begins. The couple have children, two sons, and Cain murders Abel, is judged by God and is pushed even further from Eden, to the land of Nod, but with the mark of God on him, the reminder that God's judgment and God's grace go with him into the future outside the Garden.

The truth of that story does not have to do with biology or geography. It has to do with the human condition. It answers the oldest question in history - "Who are we? What is human life about?" In an interview American author John Steinbeck said: "I believe there is only one story in the world, and only one. Humans are caught in their lives,... in a net of good and evil." [See Cultural Information Service, Viewers Guide, East of Eden]

He wrote that story in a novel he named East of Eden. In it one of the characters says:

"It is easy out of laziness, out of weakness, to throw oneself into the lap of the deity, saying 'I couldn't help it: the way was set.' But think of the glory of the choice! That makes a man a man. A cat has no choice, a bee must make honey. There's no godliness there..."

Steinbeck saw that the focus of the Biblical story is what happens after Eden. He saw that the glory and the tragedy of our humanity happens, not in some secure paradise, but in the world.

The traditional way to interpret our primal story is that human sin angered God who responded by ejecting man and woman from Eden... Paradise Lost. Life outside the Garden, particularly tilling the soil and having babies is essentially punishment for sin. There is an alternative interpretation which, I believe, is better and more helpful. It's that the fullness of human life is only possible outside Paradise. Full human life does not occur in the enclosed security of the Garden of Eden with its lushness and abundance and available food... Humanity has more to do with plowing the soil and planting and worrying and praying for rain and cursing when it doesn't come and loving and laughing and weeping and dying and, of course, choosing, always making choices, taking chances, making mistakes, starting again. That's our glory - that's our nobility and beauty. That's the brilliance of the Judeo/Christian definition of the human condition: the best about us has something to do with planting, working, struggling, aspiring...not simply plucking food from the trees whenever we are hungry.

Genesis suggest that what God wants of his creatures, the masterpieces of creation, is maturity, full personhood, responsibility, independence, accountability. What God wants are men and women with a sense of their exalted place in creation; people who are profoundly grateful for the grace of it all and profoundly willing to live it fully and to take responsibility for it.

The purpose of religion, therefore, is to help us be adults, to cultivate autonomy, not to make us dependent. That is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant in his much-quoted phrase, "Man come of age." God, he taught, wants us to be big enough to exert the authority we have been given to know that we are the managers of creation, that the outcome of human history is still to be determined, that it is being shaped by decisions God has given us the responsibility to make. God's will is not that we remain weak, dependent children, but strong, healthy, mature, independent adults. And in order to accomplish that, Genesis teaches, God leads the man and woman out of the Garden. God leads you and me out of Eden.

From the beginning, the religion of Israel - and then Christian religion - was tilted in the direction of the world. That made it unique among religions - which traditionally - are suspicious of the world.

The late Carlyle Marney, a delightfully human Southern Baptist theologian, wrote that this was a discovery he had made late in life. God wants us in the world. Further, Marney used to say, the decision to get into the world is the most important and determinative decision in our civilization...

"Western man literally dove into matter. He exploded out of the Garden of Eden with a hammer in his hand. He hammered, twisted, melted, congealed, braided, shaped, organized, traded, harnessed, mastered the stuff of this present world.... The West went on a venture, a journey, finding its banners as it went and fighting always its nostalgia to go East and out of this world." [Priests to Each Other, p. 26]

That idea, that the stuff of this world, matter, material, creation, even human flesh - is good, and the arena for God's activity and the vehicle for God's saving love will, of course, be expressed most eloquently in incarnation, God's son living in history, enfleshed.

How unfortunate that religion so often moves in the opposite direction.

Healthy religion never masquerades itself as a security system to protect believers from all the dangers of the world but rather supports people as they live their vocations in the world. Genesis proposes that real life is on the far side of Eden where beauty, nobility, ugliness and shoddiness cohabit; and where there is always the potential for tragedy but also for glory and greatness.

Escorted out of Eden, the man and woman make another disturbing discovery - their own mortality. Inside the Garden, not only is there enough food to eat, everything is forever. Outside, people get old and die. What a shame it seems to live under the sentence of death. And yet in wiser moments we do know that death too is an integral and precious part of the goodness of God's creation and therefore of our humanness. Part of the triviality of the Greek gods was their immortality. It is the vulnerability, the voluntary mortality of this God who lives and dies like a man that has so gripped the hearts and minds of people ever since the crucifixion. We do understand on occasion that if there was no death there would be no life. Abraham Maslow was recuperating from a severe heart attack and spent his time sitting by a window overlooking a river. He wrote in a letter to a friend:

"The confrontation with death - and the reprieve from it - makes everything look so precious, so sacred, so beautiful that I feel more strongly than ever the impulse to love it, to embrace it, and to let myself be overwhelmed by it. My river has never looked so beautiful... Death, and its ever-present possibility makes love, passionate love, more possible. I wonder if we could love passionately, if ecstasy would be possible at all, if we knew we'd never die." [Rollo May, Love and Will, p. 99]

In all of human history I suppose no one ever knew better than St. Paul what it is like to live outside the garden. In fact, no one ever wrote more graphically about the power of sin and the reality of death "O, wretched man that I am," he wrote, "who will deliver me from this body of death?" Yet, the miracle which Paul had experienced, and could never quite get over, was that in the middle of this life, in the midst of sin and death, to use his language, God's love appears. We have been put in a new

situation. In his letter of introduction to the Christians in Rome he wrote: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... God's love has been poured into our hearts..."

Paul was no pollyanna. Life in the world was very real. The life of faith was not easy. To be a believer was not to re-enter the security of Eden. By no means. It was to live in a world where tragedy and suffering and persecution still happen but with full confidence in God's powerful love.

Paul's greatest interpreter, Karl Barth, taught that religion ordinarily concludes that if you are faithful, you will be rewarded; life will be like the paradise of a secure garden: that if you love God and obey the rules, everything will be good and happy: you will be successful and safe. Barth - at a time in Western history when no one else remembered it - reminded the Christian world that the power of the Gospel is precisely in the declaration that redemption happens in this world, within human history, not out of it: and that the life of faith is lived as thoroughly human life in human history. Barth wrote, with a twinkle in his eye I think:

"The merry people of God are merry when there is no merriment." [The Epistle to the Romans, p. 154]

What Genesis proposes, and what St. Paul and Karl Barth pick up, is that life outside Eden is where God is and therefore where the life of faith is to be lived and that is good news essentially because that is where we must live. Sometimes, outside Eden, the best evidence of God we can come up with is our own gnawing hunger, the empty space inside ourselves. It is not paradise. Sometimes the test comes back and the tumor is malignant. Sometimes the surgery is unsuccessful. Sometimes the dream shatters into pathetic fragments and the only thing we can think of to say sounds like something another man said "My God, why have you forsaken me?" That's how it is outside Eden.

Jesus of Nazareth knew this story too. Among the customs, traditions and rituals of his people's religion, Jesus knew the one about God and the man and woman he had made and how they left their garden paradise. Jesus remembered that story, I imagine, on the day he decided to leave Nazareth and the security of the family business and the comfortability of bed and board. And part of what he proceeded to do was to call people out of an old and comfortable religious structure. Part of what he did - and does - is to invite people to leave old securities behind and become new men and new women.

So, the summons, ancient as this story but contemporary as your life, is always to the Far Side of Eden, away from the Garden. In recent years he has asked his people to leave behind old ideas which have provided security of sorts for years, comfortable ideas, for example about the role of women or about race. Jesus Christ continues to ask us to let go of secure ideas about peace and justice and the future in order to think anew and be responsible...in our attitude about South Africa, Central America, in relations with adversaries old stereotypes are no longer adequate.

Jesus Christ continues, I believe, to invite us to be fully human, free, mature, autonomous. He urges us sometimes to new tasks, new relationships, new battles to fight, new mountains to climb, new places to be. That potential, that possibility, is our glory.

God, the ancient story suggests, is not adequately described as the parent to whom we flee when the going gets tough. God is that, of course... Our refuge and strength. But God is also in the business of pushing people out into the world.

God's call, God's appearance in your life and mine, may be like nothing so much as a firm but gentle push through the gates of whatever garden in which we are hiding. The allure - the promise - is that in escorting us, calling us, pushing us into the far side of Eden, God is giving us full and new life.

Amen.

Eternal God, before mountains were brought forth, you were God.
Before we were, you were God.
After we are, you will be God.

We praise you that in times of trouble we can turn to you for comfort.

We praise you that in death's dark valley, you are present to hold us.

We praise you that when we are comfortable you push us, that you have work for us to do, and songs to be sung, and mountains to be climbed and life to be lived.

We praise you that you have loved us and saved us and given us new life. In Jesus Christ your son, our Lord. Amen.